

# Rhodora

JOURNAL OF

THE NEW ENGLAND BOTANICAL CLUB

---

Vol. 18.

November, 1916.

No. 215.

---

THE DOCTORS JOHN BRICKELL.

B. L. ROBINSON.

THE writer has recently been working on a revision of *Brickellia*, a genus of eupatorioid *Compositae*, abundant in the western part of our country and in the warmer parts of America, although barely entering the region covered by Gray's Manual. During this task an attempt was made to learn something of the man for whom the group was named. In the original publication, its author, Stephen Elliott, in his Sketch of the Botany of South Carolina and Georgia, ii. 290 (1822?), says "I have named it in commemoration of Dr. John Brickell, of Savannah, who at one period of his life paid much attention to the botany of this country, and made known to Dr. Muhlenberg, Fraser and others, many of its undescribed plants."

With this excellent start, giving the full name, profession, place of residence, and correspondents of the person in question, it seemed likely that such further facts as the dates of his birth and death, the extent and nature of his publications, etc., could be readily ascertained. However, in the usual sources of such information, the material found was neither extensive nor consistent.

Wittstein in his Etymologisch-botanisches Handwörterbuch, 123 (1856) says: "**Brickellia** ELL. (*Compositae*). Nach JOHN BRICKELL; schrieb: The nat. hist. of North Carolina, Dublin 1837."

Dr. Gray in the Synoptical Flora, i. pt. 2, 103 (1884) cautiously confines his statement regarding the dedication of the genus to the following words: "*Dr. John Brickell* of Georgia, correspondent of Muhlenberg and Elliott."

Britten & Boulger in their Biographical Index of British and Irish



Botanists, 22 (1893), give the following: "**Brickell, John** (fl. 1730–1745). M. D. 'Nat. Hist. N. Carolina,' Dublin, 1737. Cat. American plants and trees, Dublin, 1745. Sent plants to Muhlenberg. Elliott, Bot. Carolina, ii. 290. *Brickellia* Ell."

In the Catalogue of the Library of the Arnold Arboretum, i. 111 (1914), occurs the following:

**Brickell, John.** *Jeffersonia* [New York. 1800.]

*Medical repository*, 1800. i. 555.

—— The natural history of North-Carolina, with an account of the trade, manners, and customs of the Christian and Indian inhabitants. Dublin. 1737. sm. 8°. pp. [4], xvi, 408. Map and 4 plates.

"Of the vegetables of North Carolina," pp. 57–106.

—— *Stellandria* [and] *Stellandria glabra*. [New York. 1803.] 8°.

*Medical repository*, 1803, vi, 327.

The fact that must strike anyone who attentively examines these records is that they attribute to Dr. John Brickell an extraordinarily long period of activity. It is true the date 1837 given by Wittstein is merely a clerical or typographical error, for the Natural History of North Carolina by Brickell was published a hundred years earlier. It passed through several editions, or rather reprints, one in 1737, one, it is said, in 1739, another in 1743, and according to Watt in the *Bibliotheca Britannica* and to Allibone in his *Critical Dictionary of English Literature*, i. 244, the earliest in 1723. However, a man who could prepare for publication such a work even as early as 1737 (not to mention 1723 — a date open to suspicion of error) was certainly not likely to be writing for the *Medical Repository* in 1803. Nor would a man who, according to Britten & Boulger, flourished in 1730–45, be likely to have been a correspondent of Muhlenberg and Stephen Elliott, who "flourished" at least a generation later.

Suspecting that two men of the same name and profession, though of very different epochs, had been confused by the authors quoted, the writer made such search for precise records as time and opportunity permitted. It soon became clear that the Dr. John Brickell of Savannah in the time of Elliott was a physician and botanist of more than local reputation, who was among the original subscribers to the *Medical Repository* and who contributed to that journal the following articles:

1) A communication of three paragraphs, hexade 1, vol. i. 573 (1798), describing as a new genus, under the name of *Jeffersonia*, the yellow jasmine of the southern states, apparently without knowledge



of the earlier description of the same plant as *Gelsemium*. The article is prefaced by the editorial note: "*The following article is from a letter, just received, from Dr. Brickell, of Savannah, whose Botanical Communications we shall always be happy to admit.*"

2) Theory of Puerperal Fever. Hex. 1, ii. 15–17 (1799).

3) Botanical Intelligence from Dr. Brickell, of Savannah, in the State of Georgia, addressed to the Editors. Hex. 1, vi. 327–8 (1803). In this paper Brickell describes under the name *Stellandria Glabra* the plant which appeared during the same year in Michaux's Flora, ii. 219, as *Schisandra coccinea*. Brickell also mentions a new species of *Samolus*, and states that *Kuhnia* occurs with distinct anthers — an observation acute for the period. At one point in his article he refers to "my friend Mr. Stephen Elliott."

4) Effects of Alkalies on Poisons. Hex. 2, ii. 441–2 (1805).

5) Sketches relative to the Natural History of the Blood and a Theory of Gout, communicated by John Brickell, M. D. of Savannah, to Dr. Mitchill. Hex. 2, vi. 45 (1809).

Muhlenberg in his Catalogue, on page iv. of the preface (1813), gives a list of friends and correspondents who had assisted him by communicating specimens or seeds. Among these appears "Brickell, (John) M. D. from Georgia, deceased."

It therefore became clear that the Dr. John Brickell in question wrote articles from 1798 to 1809 and had died before 1813.

Records, perhaps wholly unconnected with our subject, were found showing that there was a student of the name John Brickell at Columbia College in 1774 and that a John Brickell was recommended for an appointment in the United States army in 1782.

From the facts here assembled it seemed clear that the Dr. John Brickell in question was of a later generation than the man of the same name who wrote in the first half of the 18th century the Natural History of North Carolina. However, no precise information being available as to the dates of birth or death or regarding possible relationship of these two men, the problem was turned over to Miss Mary A. Day, the experienced librarian of the Gray Herbarium. Dr. George E. Richards of Boston also very kindly made search at the Boston Medical Library. Finally, in reply to a letter of inquiry addressed by Miss Day to the Georgia Historical Society, an organization with headquarters in Savannah, the following highly satisfactory letter was received.



Savannah, Ga., 23d September, 1916.

Miss Mary A. Day, Librarian Gray Herbarium,  
Cambridge, Mass.

Dear Miss Day:—

I take great pleasure in giving you the following information in reply to yours of the 20th concerning Dr. John Brickell, but regret that I cannot give more.

Dr. Brickell died in the year 1809, and the day after his death the following notice appeared in the only newspaper published here:

From *The Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger*, Saturday, Dec. 23, 1809.

"Died, on Friday evening, 22d instant, doctor JOHN BRICKELL, aged sixty years.

"Dr. Brickell was a native of the county of Lowth (Ireland) and had been forty years in America, thirty of which he spent in Georgia. He was an excellent classic scholar, an ingenious naturalist, and a sincere patriot, having evinced a fervent attachment to the honor and welfare of the United States. In a country peculiarly favorable to botanical researches, Dr. B. (as this was among his favorite studies) had distinguished himself by unwearied application, and the many communications he received from the learned of various climes proved him to have been successful in his pursuit.

"As a politician, he always ranked among the firmest and most incorruptible adherents to the whig administrations of this country, and often mourned the misfortunes of that one he had left; and will long be regretted as a friend to the rights and liberties of the world, as an elegant and accomplished scholar, and as an honest man."

Dr. Brickell left a will which I have read today. It is dated Dec. 5, 1809, and was probated Jan'y 2, 1810. It opens with the statement that he was "weak in body." It is a short paper, and by it he left the whole of his estate to his "brother (now with me) James Brickell." Among the papers filed with the will is a single sheet containing only these words: "The whole of the estate of Doctor John Brickell was left in the possession of his brother James Brickell who disposed of the whole, the lot to Mr. Archibald S. Bulloch, and the negroes to different persons. The furniture, &c., was sold at his instance at public auction by Minis & Henry"

Filed 21 May, 1811.

(Signed) Rich. Leake.  
(One of the Executors).

There is no other name in the will besides the brother James.  
I am glad to give you the foregoing, but fear it will be of little use to you.

Very truly yours,

Wm. Harden,  
Librarian.

Thus, thanks to the kind interest of Mr. Harden and his skill in searching out old records, the matter in hand can now be cleared up. It is evident that in nearly all references to the dedication of the genus *Brickellia* two men of identical name were confused, both being presumably from the east of Ireland, both belonging to the same profession, both having biological interests, and both being authors of papers relating to phases of natural history.



It is easy to infer that John Brickell of Georgia, the friend of Muhlenberg and Elliott, may have been the son or grandson of the earlier John Brickell of North Carolina, but no evidence on this matter has come to hand.

It may be mentioned that even before Elliott dedicated his genus *Brickellia* to his friend Brickell, Rafinesque had used the name *Brickellia* in one of those hurried, careless, and in no way justified changes of name so frequent in his works. Thus in the *Medical Repository*, hex. 2, ii. 352-3 (1808) Rafinesque characteristically writes "Having found in the *Flora Boreali-Americana* of Michaux, many new genusses, which had already been published under other names by different authors, or to which unappropriate names were given against the usual botanical rules, I shall rectify those errors; in the former case annulling Michaux's names and adopting the former ones, such as \* \* \*

While, in the latter I shall create new names more appropriated, and I shall call \* \* \*

*Brickellia*, the sponcopsis of do. [Michaux]."

By *sponcopsis*<sup>1</sup> it has been generally inferred that Rafinesque meant *Ipomopsis*, a name employed by Michaux for the plant now called *Gilia rubra* (L.) Heller. Rafinesque clearly had no right to change the name used by Michaux and his *Brickellia* has no validity under any code, even in the unlikely contingency that this particular section of *Gilia* should regain generic standing. Our interest in the matter at present lies solely in the circumstance that it was an attempt to give recognition to the same Dr. John Brickell for whom Elliott later named the now well known genus *Brickellia* of the *Compositae*. It is true, Rafinesque made no explanation of his *Brickellia*, but that very fact would indicate that it was given in honor of a man then prominent, and it is to be noticed that it was published in the *Medical Repository*, a journal to which Brickell was at that period a not infrequent contributor, a fact which probably led Rafinesque to assume that explanation as to his identity would have been superfluous.

Regarding the earlier Dr. John Brickell little is known. His *Natural History of North Carolina*, now a work of rarity, prized by collectors of early Americana, was drawn largely, though without acknowledgement, from an earlier *History of Carolina*, by John

<sup>1</sup> This misprinted name has received still further distortion by Reichenbach, who in his *Conspectus Regni Vegetabilis* 212<sup>o</sup> (1828) cites it as *Spogopsis*, a spelling which is copied by Pfeiffer in his usually very accurate *Nomenclator*, i. 467 (1873).



Lawson (London, 1709, 1714, 1718), and has been variously estimated. Thus, Jared Sparks (North American Review, xxiii. 288, Oct., 1826) remarks concerning it "a more daring piece of plagiarism was never executed," while J. Bryan Grimes, in a prefatory note accompanying a facsimile reprint issued by authority of the Trustees of the [North Carolina] Public Libraries in 1911, calls attention to the fact that although largely based upon the earlier work of Lawson, Brickell's Natural History is expanded to nearly twice the length and contains, especially on the medical side, much original matter.

According to Grimes, in the prefatory note above mentioned, Dr. John Brickell and his brother the Rev. Matthias Brickell came to Carolina with Gov. Burrington. John settled at Edenton. He was on the grand jury of the whole province in 1731, and, being appointed about that time a member of a mission to the Cherokee Indians, took part in an expedition to the interior which is thought to have penetrated well into what is now Tennessee. Soon after this journey he returned to England and his subsequent life is wholly unknown. Besides his Natural History he wrote a Catalogue of American Trees and Plants which will bear the Climate of England. According to Allibone (l. c.) this was a folio published in London in 1739. However, Britten & Boulger give the place of publication as Dublin and the date as 1745, which would indicate that this work also passed through more than one edition.

To differentiate, by way of summary, the two men who have been so generally confused, they were as follows:

1) An earlier Dr. John Brickell, who settled at Edenton, North Carolina, in the earlier half of the 18th century, author of a somewhat grotesque and largely compiled Natural History of North Carolina, published (according to Allibone) in 1723, with better known editions in 1737, 1739, and 1743; also a Catalogue of American Trees and Plants which will bear the Climate of England, published in London, 1739, and in Dublin, 1745.

2) A later Dr. John Brickell, born in County Louth, Ireland, in or about 1749, for thirty years resident in Savannah, Georgia, where he died 22 December, 1809, an acute observer of the local vegetation, a man highly respected, author of several medical and botanical communications to the then prominent Medical Repository of New York, a friend of Muhlenberg, Fraser, and of Elliott, who dedicated to him the composite genus *Brickellia*.

GRAY HERBARIUM.